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APRIL

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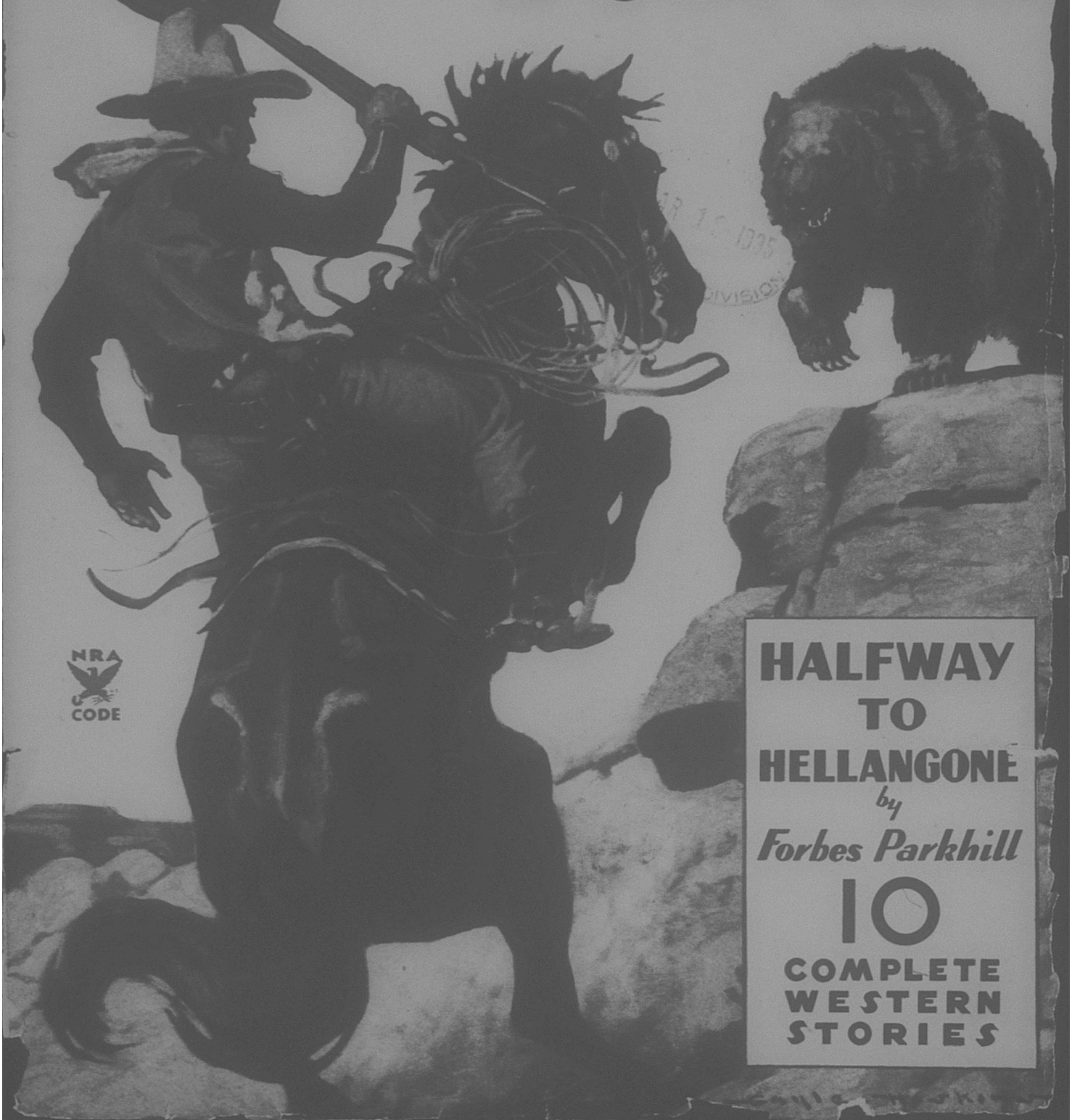
Cowboy Stories



NRA CODE

HALFWAY TO HELLANGONE

by *Forbes Parkhill*

10 COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

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On Sale First Wednesday of Each Month

Volume XXVII
Number 4

Cowboy Stories

APRIL
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Table of Contents

PAGE

1 Action Novel

42 HALFWAY TO HELLANGONE . . . . *Forbes Parkhill*
The range country stretches on through miles and miles—room for all kinds of men—and guns—and powdersmoke!

2 Novelettes

8 RED SHEEP . . . . . *Robert D. Stelle*
Skeletons walking in the night—red sheep appearing mysteriously in closely-watched flocks—trouble.

88 USE YOUR .45 . . . . . *George Gallup*
The blazing trail of lead-pocked rocks was crammed with bloody action—but you could use your head!

6 Short Stories

23 BUCKED DOWN . . . . . *Anson Hard*
A whirling, snorting cyclone cleared the bars, sunfishing, twisting, rocking, boiling down——

34 NO BATHIN' . . . . . *Buck Pendleton*
Messages were sent on bullets in the old days!

72 HELL ON THE HOOF . . . . . *Archie Joscelyn*
Over the cliff went 800 pounds of squirming horns, hoofs and beefsteak—and one waddy!

81 OLD DOGS . . . . . *James P. Olsen*
New tricks don't come so easy after a while—but the old one stirred up plenty.

107 THE MARK OF THE CAT . . . . . *William Lester*
Conspiracy romped free and fast on the range until a half-wild critter interfered.

118 THE BEEG BAD WOOLF . . . . . *S. Omar Barker*
El Senor Coyote rides again, and an airplane cannot land.

1 Feature

87 THE BAR NOTHING . . . . . *W. P. Trent, Jr.*
"Youth Must Be Served."

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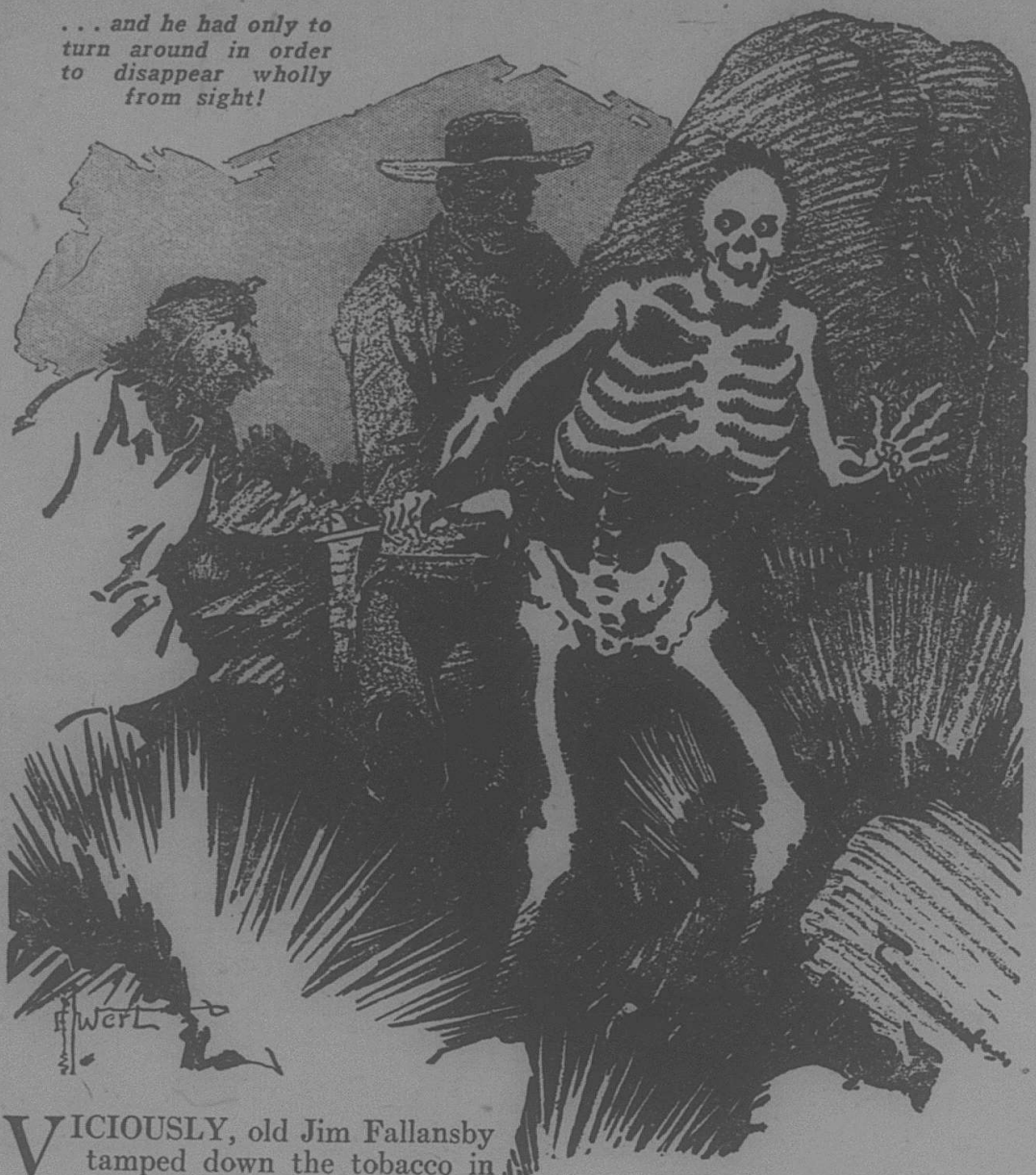


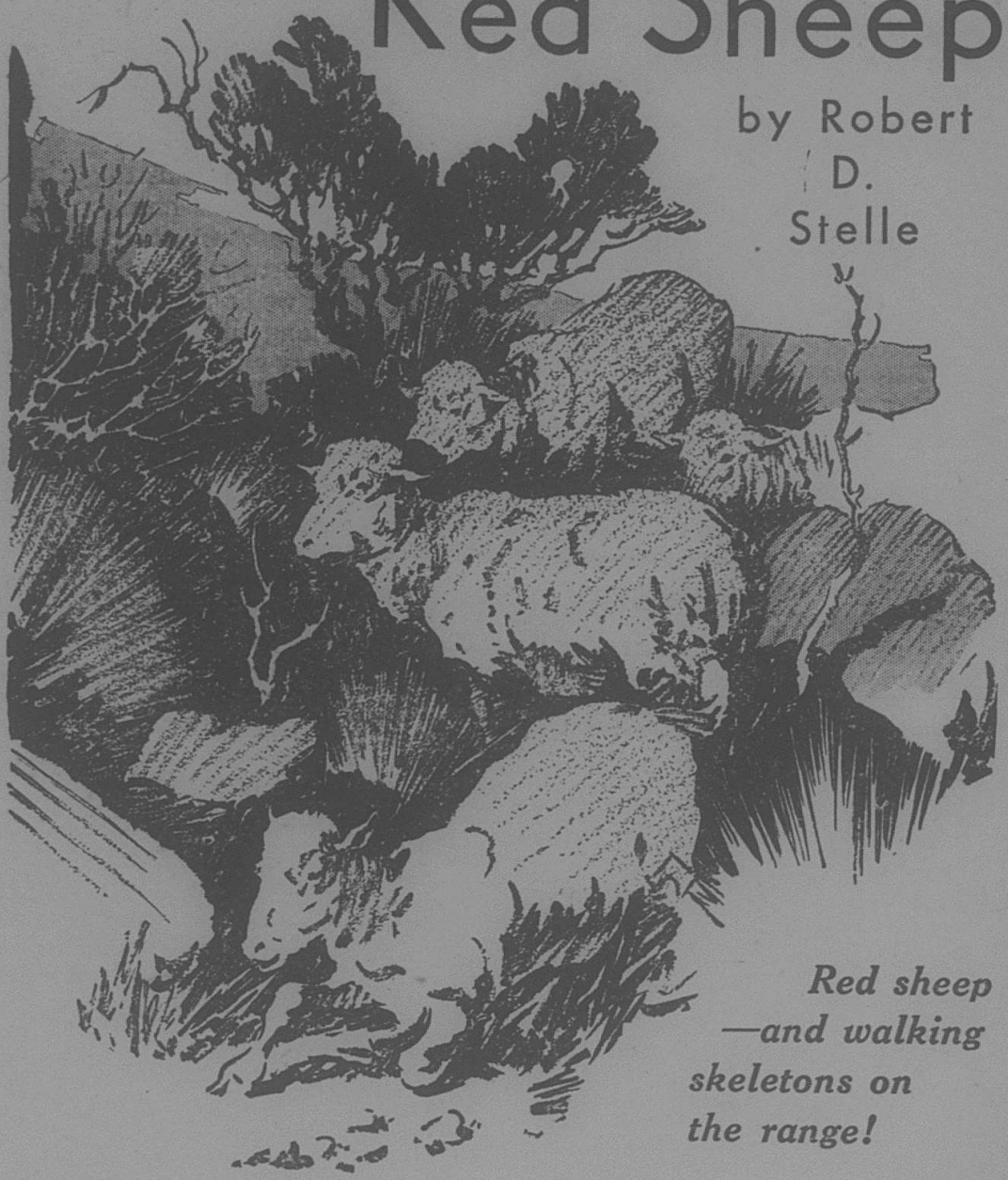
. . . and he had only to turn around in order to disappear wholly from sight!

VICIOUSLY, old Jim Fallansby tamped down the tobacco in his blackened pipe. "If I didn't know that Jeff Johnson, dang his hide, had been literally drove into this dog-blasted sheep-raisin' business with bitterness in his heart, and only because he thought he couldn't see no other way of savin' his ranch, I'll be dad-burned if I wouldn't be in favor of goin' gunnin' for the old buzzard," he announced grimly.

"Well, Jim, they may be somethin' in what you say, but you gotta give the old hoss thief credit for goin' into it, lock, stock an' barrel when he done it," Buck Raines remarked. "Of course, they didn't none of us think he'd keep at it after we got rid of them damn Mex sheep-herders of his, let alone that he'd git them dod-rotted Navajos into it! It's gittin' purty raw when he takes them into podnership with them stinkin' woolies, knowin' that nobody dassn't give them war whoops the run-

Red Sheep

by Robert D. Stelle



Red sheep —and walking skeletons on the range!

around. Them bein' gov'ment wards, we'd have the whole dang United States Army on our necks if we done anything to 'em!"

Following this dialogue between the two most influential cattlemen in Apache County, there was a general rumble among the assembled ranchers who had met to cuss and discuss the trying situation. And what made it all the worse was that there was not one among the old-timers whom, at one time or another, Jeff had not befriended in an hour of need.

"That was sure a clever scheme,

if you ask me," grunted Mike Shane, a big, burly, red-faced son of Erin. "All it costs Jeff is the price of the sheep. Them Injins, bein' podners, feeds theirselves, an' if a wooly dies, they eats the meat an' tans the hide. But that's all right. What makes me blood boil, however, is that them same murderin' war whoops won't rent a foot of their reservation grazin' land to nobody else, claimin' they needs it all for them cussed sheep Jeff's give 'em a half interest in."

Lying upon his stomach in the sun and smoking innumerable cigarettes, a freckle-faced, fiery-headed puncher, whose innocent-looking blue eyes masked a clever brain, looked up at Mike with a grin.

"What would it be worth to you, Mike, if I was to tackle this here thing as has all you gents buffaloed, an' was to git them scalp dancers to throw up their bargain?" he asked.

Had it been any one except "Freckles" Gordon, such a proposition would have met with instant hoots of derision from the many waddies who had accompanied their bosses to the conclave. But Freckles had a reputation for devilish ingenuity when it came to upsetting things. He was about as well known as the "Stormy Pretzel," and this bade fair to be right down his alley.

"I'll give you one hundred dollars, Freckles, an' me blessin'," Mike answered promptly.

"How about the rest of you fellers?" Freckles asked as he came to his feet with the lithe ease of a cat to stand towering above the seated men about him. His surprising way of making good his boasts compelled respect, even as his pranks called down whole-souled curses from the victims of his jokes.

"I'll add another hundred," agreed Buck Raines.

"An' I'll put in another," added Jim Fallansby, "providin' only that they ain't to be no violence. I'm for anything as'll stop them cussed sheep from spreadin', but I won't stand fer no killin', range burnin', or anything as'll bring permanent injury to Jeff or his ranch proper. Dang it! He didn't want to git into it, nohow, an' I owes him too dodgasted much to want to hurt him, but we just gotta stop them sheep, somehow! If we don't, we all knows it won't be long till the whole dogblasted country won't be nothin' but blattin' woolies!" Jim paused a moment, then added; "An' we're not to be brung into this, neither. If you get caught in some devilment, Freckles, it's your funeral, an' you'll have to shoulder the blame."

Twenty minutes later, a purse aggregating $1,500 had been pledged, Freckles' own employer, Frank Updike donating the puncher's services, on full pay, as his share of the contribution.

"Well, gents, you can count her as good as did," Freckles boasted. "I won't use no violence of no kind, an' all I asks is to be left alone to do this here thing in my own way. It may take a month or two, but since I'm carryin' all the responsibility, I aims to claim all the glory. I got a idea," he concluded cryptically, but despite the almost tearful pleas of his curious associates, refused to elucidate.

LEAPING CALF squatted on his heels, the smoke from his cigarette and the flapping of the tails of his belted shirt the only moving things about him. Even his usually restless eyes were still—fixed in an unblinking stare upon the ground before him. But for the wide band about his head and the style of his moccasins, he might have been classed as

a member of almost any tribe, but these were distinctly Navajo.

In front, and to his left, was what, to the uninitiated, might have been taken for a gray boulder basking in the afternoon Arizona sun.

"Ugh!" Leaping Calf grunted, and the stone, almost instantly, underwent a startling transformation, resolving itself into a blanketed companion of the stoical smoker.

At a nod from Leaping Calf, the erstwhile sleeper started a tiny fire, flashed his beady eyes to the southeast, where the rocky hills danced eerily in the simmering afternoon heat, then back at Leaping Calf, who grinned at him.

"He said he would be here at four," Leaping Calf explained in their native tongue. "It is now almost that time."

"Maybe so," grunted his companion dubiously, estimating the distance from their camp on the south bank of the almost dry Zuni River to the top of the nearest ridge.

"When Hank Ellison says four, he means four," asserted Leaping Calf confidently. "He is one white man whose word to a Navajo means something. It was he who paid for my operation, with his own money, that I might not always be a cripple."

"Yes, and he is the man who sent us food last winter when the early snows caught us in the high hills. Do you believe that he can solve the mystery of the red sheep?"

"Yes. He said he would, and what he says, he does."

"How do you know this?" the Indian asked.

"Jeff Johnson sent him word and says he promised to come, asking that I meet him here at four to-day." Leaping Calf shrugged his shoulders. "Johnson is a good man, but Hank Ellison is better. I think he is protected by the Great Manitou," and his mouth tightened. "Assuredly, he will need that help."

"Ugh," agreed the fire builder, laying upon the fire two more sticks from their scanty supply, then glancing up at the hills again. "Ugh!" he exclaimed in quite a different tone, and without bothering to look up, Leaping Calf nodded sagely.

"Said I not so?"

"WELL, Leaping Calf," Hank addressed the smiling Indian, some fifteen minutes later, speaking in Navajo, "I see you are here. Who is your friend?"

"Lame Wolf," Leaping Calf explained, and the fact that he immediately busied himself unsaddling Pancho was proof of his high regard for the tall, lean, bronzed Hank, whose customary sardonic smile was now warm and friendly.

"There is food and tobacco in my alforjas," Hank explained, and Lame Wolf immediately opened the saddlebags, while Leaping Calf led Pancho to the creek to water and rub him down.

As, with experienced hands, Lame Wolf busied himself preparing something to eat, Hank took a soiled and rumpled letter from his pocket and proceeded to re-read it carefully.

DEAR HANK: As I rote you before I'm in a hell of a jam an gettin no better fast.

Of course I knows that Jim Fallansby, Buck Raines an likely Mike Shane is at the bottom of it but I cant pin nothin onto em. I cant say as I blames em such a hell of a lot. Still if I cant put this acrost they aint nothin I can do as will save my ranch.

You see them dam sheep turnin red has got them dern navahos runnin in sircles an sincet I last rote you theys been sheep skeletons seen up there an when I went up shore nuff they was a

skeleton layin there but the ones they seen was walkin.

Anyhow they ain't a dang war hoop as'll go nigh the dern place an I cant see no trale. Honest Hank you don't know how glad I am youre comin up. Boy if you can only turn the tables on them cusses thout hurtin em seerus Im danged if Id mind losin the ranch so derned much but it would shore gall me to let them buzzards put it over on me. Dang it all Hank I dont beleeve they reely hones to hurt me none but theys sumpn shore rotten.

Leapin Calf is gonna meet you where you sed. I don't know the place but he says he does.

Come a hootin Hank for I shore needs yore help.

Your frend

JEFF JOHNSON.

As Hank finished reading Jeff's almost undecipherable scrawl, Leaping Calf returned with Pancho and the two scrubby ponies they had carefully hidden while waiting. Then he squatted before Hank.

"Gracias, Leaping Calf. Now tell me just what has happened to Jeff Johnson's sheep."

"One day, one red sheep—war paint. Next day, two. Next day, three. One moon, twenty-eight red sheep. No moon, sheep skeletons walk across mesa. Navajos leave."

"Didn't you go up to see what was there?" Hank asked, his eyes twinkling at the Indian's laconic description.

"No. Bad medicine. Red sheep bad enough, but ghost sheep——" And his shrug would have done credit to a Frenchman.

"Is that all that happened?" Hank persisted.

"Last week, red sheep die. Moon dark again. Same night, dead sheep catch fire and walk away. Jeff Johnson say you come, promising to stop red sheep and ghosts. Otherwise, Navajos leave flocks. Very bad medicine. I tell Chief Lean Horse you come. He order Navajos wait. Rain last week. Red sheep turn white!"

"Huh?" grunted Hank, his eyes narrowing. "You say they turned white in the rain?"

"Ugh," grunted Lame Wolf and Leaping Calf as one.

By now, the simple meal was ready, after which, Hank handed each Indian a half-pound sack of tobacco to their huge delight and promptly-expressed appreciation, and then he lapsed into a brown study. Nor did he speak further to them that night.

"Leaping Calf, are you and Lame Wolf willing to take up a ghost trail with me?" Hank asked the next night as they reined in on the crest of the hill overlooking Jeff Johnson's ranch.

"You come, too?" Leaping Calf asked uneasily.

"Yes," Hank agreed. "I'll stay right with you."

"Then we will come," Leaping Calf committed himself, and Lame Wolf nodded his assent, but without enthusiasm.

Hank chuckled softly as he eyed the two young braves.

"Then meet me here to-morrow night, but tell no one, except Chief Lean Horse," and as they nodded, he headed for Jeff Johnson's.

"GOSH, HANK, but I'm sure glad you're here," Jeff exclaimed as the two sat down upon the porch of the big ranch house. "Just night b'fore last, I was tellin' Ma as how I'd rather have you than any other damn man in the State of Arizony."

"Where is Ma?" Hank inquired. "Gone to bed?"

"Naw. She—she'd orta been home b'fore this, as she's sure r'arin' to see you. She went down to Bilbo, yestiddy, to git some stuff. She shoulda been back by now. How-

somever, Curly Hughs went with her to do the drivin'."

"Curly Hughs? What sorta lookin' jasper is he? He wasn't workin' for you when I was here last year, Jeff."

"He's our new sheriff. I sent fer him to come up an' look into this here thing b'fore I knowed fer sure you was comin', but he don't seem to be gittin' no place. He's a tall, light-complected feller with powerful curly hair, an' a squint in his off eye. Hey! Where'n—what——" Hank had swung to his feet, reached for his guns and was buckling on his heavy belts, all in one swift, smooth motion.

"Get me your best an' fastest hoss, Jeff. Have 'em put my saddle on him, too. I'm sure sorry old Pancho's all tired out from our sixty-mile ride to-day. I'm headin' for Bilbo."

With a bang, old Jeff's chair hit the floor, his usually ruddy face now pale. "What's wrong, Hank?"

"How'n hell did you happen to let a buzzard like Curly Hughs get to be sheriff?" Hank countered sharply.

"Why—why—well, you see, when that Santa Fe mail train was held up, two months ago, Newt Baker took up the trail. He got shot, an's been in the hospital, up to Phoenix, ever since. Well, anyhow, this here Curly bobs up an' says that if we'll make him sheriff, temporary, he'll guarantee to git them train robbers.

"Well, I don't know jest how it was done, but Jim Fallansby an' Buck Raines done it, an' he brung in the body of the robber an' all the mail. Seems like they wasn't much money in it—only some twelve, fourteen hundred dollars, but they was a five-thousand-dollar reward up fer the capture of the bandit, dead or alive, an' he's jest kept on sheriffin' ever since."

"Of all the dang, mutton-headed—well, that ain't neither here nor there. Get me that hoss, Jeff, an' don't let nobody know I'm here."

"Sure, Hank. Hey! Bill!" Jeff yelled. A half-dressed puncher called back from the bunk house. "Git Brandy. Put this feller's saddle on, an' step on it!" He turned back to Hank. "Ain't much fer looks, Hank, but he's the best dang hoss in Apache County, an' fast as hell. You—you don't think nothin's happened to Ma, do you?"

"I sure hope not, Jeff, but I'll bet you a hundred dollars as Curly Hughs was the one as robbed the train. As I recalls it, they was two of them robbers. Howsomever, don't worry none. He wouldn't hurt Ma, but I got a sneakin' idea they's somethin' rotten in Denmark. I wish you'd ride over to the reservation in the mornin' an' tell Leapin' Calf for him an' Lame Wolf to take my trail an' foller me. Now, don't worry, Jeff. I may be all wet, for I'm jest playin' a hunch, an' I knows somethin' about this here Curly Hughs."

AS "Curly" Hughs entered his office the following morning, he eyed the long, lean, wide-shouldered man he found sitting there. Despite the lazy way in which he sat on the small of his back, there was something disconcerting about the man's level gray eyes, and an air which proclaimed loudly that he was no man's man but his own.

"Did you want to see me?" Curly asked as he sat down in his chair.

"You're s'posed to be the sheriff, ain't you?" the man asked, with just a slight emphasis upon the word "s'posed."

"Yeah," Curly answered shortly, trying hard to place his saturnine visitor. There was something

vaguely familiar about him, and the gleam of sardonic humor in his eyes brought about everything but comfort to the uneasy sheriff, to judge from the nervous manner in which he fumbled as he tried to roll a cigarette.

"Used to live in New Mexico, didn't you?" the stranger demanded.

Suddenly, Curly's forehead was beaded with sweat, and he tossed aside his half-finished cigarette. "Uh —say! Who are you?" he countered, his uneasiness being rapidly supplanted by increasing anger at his visitor's apparent lack of respect.

"Uh huh. I recognized you. Well, Curly, my name's Hank Ellison. They call me 'Uncertain Hank,' but it's a mistake. I'm certain. Yeah, plumb certain."

With seemingly one lithe motion, Hank was on his feet, towering above Curly, who had turned a sickly white. Grasping him by the shoulder, Hank lifted him to his feet as if he were but a child. "Yeah," Hank repeated, "I'm dang certain that you an' me's gonna take a pasear into the hills, *an' you ain't comin' back.*

"Now, don't get flustered an' try to start somethin' you can't never live to finish. I don't aim to hurt you—at least, not unnecessary. First off, you're gonna take me to where you left Ma Johnson—oh, yes you are, no mistake about that," as Curly started to protest. "An' if we don't find her plumb safe, it's gonna be just too bad for you. You dirty, lousy snake! I heard about you killin' your partner in that train holdup, just so's you could get that reward, an' I got my own idea about what you're tryin' to pull off here. Get goin'," and there was no mistaking that Hank meant what he said.

With the desperation of a cornered rat, Curly swung for his jaw, as Hank released him.

Hank's head jerked to one side a split second ahead of the blow, which whizzed by so closely that the knuckles actually brushed the skin, and then Hank's fist bored into Curly's stomach, his smoking left following, catching the sheriff on the angle of his jaw, and just below his ear, sending him crashing over his chair and resolving it into kindling wood.

With surprising speed, Curly twisted, and with a roar, was on his feet, charging, head down.

Eyes alight with the sheer joy of a good fight, balanced lightly upon the balls of his feet, Hank sidestepped the rush, his right fist flashing up and into Curly's lowered face and stopping him in his tracks as if he had connected with a pile driver, his nose and mouth blossoming into a gory mess.

Again, Hank's left streaked for the point of Curly's ear, landing flat, and the sheriff wilted in his tracks, sagging over upon his face.

Deliberately, Hank raised his booted foot and roweled Curly across the seat of his pants, the big three-inch Spanish spurs tearing through the tight cloth and into Curly's anatomy.

As if stung by a scorpion, Curly slithered ahead and struggled to his feet, grasping a leg of the wrecked chair. With a wild curse, he whirled, just as, with every ounce of his hundred and ninety pounds behind it, Hank's fist lashed out, catching Curly upon his broken, bleeding nose and driving him against the wall so hard that the plastering showered down.

Swinging forward to follow up his advantage, Hank stepped upon one of the broken rungs of the chair, throwing him off balance, as, with a

bellow of triumph, Curly rebounded from the wall, striking downward with the chair leg.

QUICK as he was, Hank was unable to dodge the blow completely, the leg striking his head a glancing blow that doubtless would have smashed his skull had it landed squarely. However, Hank's heavy Stetson, together with the extra bandanna he always carried there, saved him from the worst effects, and as Curly hurtled past, Hank spun and was upon his feet.

Now completely berserk, Curly wheeled and charged back to finish his job, but this time Hank did not slip, his right and left uppercuts both connecting, one, two, with the point of Curly's chin, and Curly's lights went out.

Stepping over to the dripping olla, Hank lifted it from its suspending hook, dashed its icy content upon Curly's face, then tossed it aside.

Yanking the spluttering, groggy Curly to his feet, Hank turned him so that he faced the door, kicking him through it and headlong down the four steps to the plank walk outside.

Attracted by the hubbub, a crowd was already gathering, standing, open-mouthed, as Hank emerged, grabbed Curly by the collar and dragged him to the hitching rack.

"Get on that hoss," Hank snapped, and the bewildered and half unconscious Curly obeyed meekly.

As Hank swung toward Brandy, a hard-boiled individual, whose cauliflower ears and crooked nose seemed strangely out of place in that setting, and who flaunted a deputy's badge, stepped forward, gun in hand.

"Stay put," he snarled.

His hands barely level with his shoulders, eyes icy and knees slightly bent, Hank turned to face him.

Seemingly unmindful of the deadly menace in Hank's glacial eyes, and probably supremely confident of his own prowess, the deputy stepped forward, evidently intending to take Hank's guns with his outstretched left hand.

With the speed of light, Hank's left hand flashed down and out, knocking aside the menacing gun which exploded, its bullet, as Hank later discovered, perforating his calf-skin vest, which, like most of his kind, he wore habitually unbuttoned. As if but a continuation of the same motion, his right hand flashed his gun, its eight-and-a-half-inch barrel crashing down upon the deputy's head with a sickening crunch.

Spinning, Hank was upon Brandy before any of the gaping crowd fully realized what had happened, and, hazing Curly's horse ahead of him, quickly disappeared into a cloud of dust, around the first corner, then into an alley. Using the hondoo of his lariat as a whip, he now lashed Curly's horse into a dead run. As they swung around the next corner, a bullet whizzed harmlessly past, but if there was any pursuit, it was soon lost as Hank and his prisoner streaked for the hills.

As soon as he felt safe from interruption, Hank stopped the lathered horses.

"Now, you take me to Ma Johnson, and don't make any false moves. I've played around with you all I aim to. Next time, I'm shooting. Get going!"

"Like hell, I will!" blubbered Curly through his puffed and ribboned lips.

"No?" questioned Hank, a wolfish grin on his face. "You just aim to be tough, do you? Well, well!" Hank's eyes were lethal as his right hand fumbled behind his

saddle, appearing, a second later, grasping a long-lashed quirt. "Are you plumb certain you ain't gonna lead the way?" he asked softly, his face suddenly like flint.

Despite his purpling eyes and still bleeding face, Curly whitened perceptibly. There was no mistaking the implacable purpose in Hank's grim face, and Curly's was not the kind of courage to court what, only too obviously, was coming. Furthermore, his eyes had caught the metallic glitter of the tiny spur rowels attached to the ends of those long, pliable lashes on the quirt.

"If—if I take you there, then what?" Curly stammered.

"Well, I ought to nail your hide to a tree to scare away other polecats," Hank gritted, "but I'll take you to the reservation and turn you over to the Injuns to take north to the State line, *an' if you come back, I'm gonna plant you.* Now, get going."

"WELL, Ma, so you have no idea why Curly took you up to that old deserted line camp and left you, huh?"

"No, Hank. In fact, Curly didn't take me. It was a hard-faced man I'd never seen before. He had the most awful-looking ears!"

"Uh huh, an' a busted nose. I know him. And he didn't say why he brought you here?"

"No, only that it was Jim Fallansby's orders, which I don't believe."

"Nope, Ma; Jim may be sore at Jeff, but he wouldn't cotton to that. Well, we know Curly was at the bottom of it, but he's out of the picture, now. Leapin' Calf an' Lame Wolf will see that he's put out of the State, and even if he's fool enough to come back, I'm sure he'll be too late.

"You see, the last time I was up here, I was over to Frank Updike's, an' he had a feller there named Freckles Gordon. I've a mind to sneak over there, come dark, and see if he ain't gone. He's jest the sort of ranny to be at the bottom of a stunt like this red sheep business."

"But, Hank, what about those skeletons and fiery sheep?" Ma Johnson asked dubiously.

"Aw, that's nothing particularly new, Ma. Just a little whitewash an' phosphorus. What really interests me is the red sheep."

"Why, Hank? Pa and I guessed how he did that. He just mixed up some of that red dirt the Indians get up near Skeleton Mesa, then dipped the sheep. It really makes pretty good paint."

"Skeleton Mesa? That's right interesting. I was just wondering where he got it."

By the time they reached the ranch, shortly after dusk, she was laughing happily over Hank's explanation of the time when he had essayed to play the rôle of Cupid, over near El Paso.

THE FOLLOWING night, just twenty-four hours later than he had originally planned, Hank met Leaping Calf and Lame Wolf at the appointed place.

"We fastened his thumbs together with a piece of wire," Leaping Calf explained, when Hank asked about Curly. "Chief Lean Horse turned him over to two of our best trailers, and they are taking him to Utah across the Painted Desert. They will take three weeks going," he added naïvely, and Hank, who was familiar with that marvelously colored hell, felt a prickling at the nape of his neck, then he grinned.

There was something devilishly ingenious in the plan that appealed to

him strongly. Not only was there no danger of Curly escaping, but after the first day upon that almost molten inferno, it would take much to persuade a far more courageous man than Curly to leave those Indians; the only ones who know the location of its few life-saving water holes.

"How far is it to Skeleton Mesa?" he asked Leaping Calf.

"Five days' march," the Navajo replied. "Why?"

"Hm-m-m!" Hank ruminated nasally. "Is there any place closer where you get your war paint?" he asked.

"Yes. About three hours' march. Not far from Todokozh Spring."

"How far is that from where you saw those red sheep?" Hank inquired.

"About an hour's walk."

"Good. Take me there."

At the foot of the cliff and the head of a blind canyon, Hank and the Indians discovered a camp fire.

"There's a small spring, and we get our paint from a cave just beyond the camp fire," Leaping Calf whispered.

"Good. Now, you two hide here and don't come until I call you. After that, there will be no more red sheep, or ghost ones, for that matter," and Hank slipped into the enshrouding gloom.

When a good forty feet from the fire, Hank hid behind a boulder and studied the layout, then chuckled softly.

Squatting beside the fire was a bareheaded man, about Hank's size, the firelight glinting upon his unruly hair. On the ground before him, lay a sheep, upon which, with meticulous care, the man was outlining in shining, shimmering white, the outlines of its skeleton. As if to admire his handiwork, or to get a better perspective, he got to his feet and walked around the sheep, head cocked to one side and drawing heavily upon his cigarette.

Hank's eyes brightened with the light of sincere appreciation. He was hard put to it to repress a chuckle as he thought of the probable effect upon the two superstitious Indians, who were watching this same scene.

One side of the man was black—even his face—while upon the other, seen against the background of the sentient darkness, was a startlingly realistic representation of an articulated skeleton. Upon a night as dark as this one promised to be, with no moon and an overcast sky, one would take oath that only that grinning, animated skeleton was walking—and the darker the night, the more startling the illusion. And he had only to turn around to disappear as completely as if swallowed up by the earth.

"That boy's an artist," Hank commented to himself. "I'll be darned if it don't more'n half get my goat as it is! Dang it! It's a shame to spoil his game! Hm-m-m! No good trying to tell him to freeze. The son of a gun could just turn his black side to me, and all heck couldn't locate him. Well, here goes, but I'm darned if I don't hate to do it!"

Intent upon putting the finishing touches upon the sheep, it is not surprising that Freckles failed to hear the moccasin-shod Hank, who stole up as silently as a shadow.

Suddenly, a cold, hard ring was pressed against the back of Freckles' neck.

"Freeze!" Hank's voice rasped menacingly.

Aside from his first start, Freckles did not move. Only a fool would have.

"Now, Freckles, just lay down on your face an' put your hands behind your back," and the uncompromising muzzle of the gun pressed forward—hard, as with a poorly smothered curse, Freckles obeyed.

"Just straighten out them legs, feller," Hank chuckled, "and don't get no funny ideas about starting a ruckus. Me, I'm Hank Ellison. I'm gonna wire yore thumbs together, unless you give your word not to start anything."

"Like hell, I will. You may be hell on wheels, but there's nobody can make me holler 'uncle,' not no time!" snarled Freckles, his voice actually trembling with chagrin.

"All right, feller. Can't say I blame you none, and in the morning, I'll sure give you a chance to get a bellyful of fighting." Reverting to Najavo, "Come on, Leaping Calf and Lame Wolf. I want you to wire this ghost's thumbs together."

BECAUSE he would not hurt their sensitive feelings, Hank's face did not betray a vestige of the mirth that made his eyes dance as the two sweating Indians approached apprehensively. That they had stuck it out at their post, let alone come at his call, was a glowing testimonial to their unbounded faith in Hank. Even as it was, Leaping Calf was the only one able to summon up sufficient courage to be the first to touch the fuming, cursing Freckles, but once the Indian felt the warmth and reality of those hands, his face assumed a positively diabolical expression of fiendish joy as he carefully wired together those muscular thumbs.

"And now, let us have some more fire," Hank instructed the grinning Navajos, at the same time, helping the raging Freckles to a sitting position.

"Fix some coffee," Hank ordered Leaping Calf, while Lame Wolf was gathering more sage brush for the fire. Then Hank liberated the sheep, which, as soon as he removed the string holding its mouth shut, ran bleating to its companions, while he followed and performed a like service for the thirty in the small corral, only to be rewarded by a burst of "baas" that almost made him regret his mercy.

"My good gosh, Freckles," Hank snorted as he came back to the fire; "I sure didn't expect to find you rustlin' sheep. How does it feel to be a dang sheep-herder?"

"You go plumb to hell!" roared Freckles, only his uncanny make-up hiding his flushed and burning face.

"Do you know," Hank chortled, "I just can't help thinking of what all the waddies are gonna say when I take you in town, drivin' these here woolies, which is sorta the 'corpus delicti,' so to speak, as they are proof of your rustling abilities."

With a curse, Freckles tossed aside all caution and gave a lurch in a mad effort to free his hands and get to his feet, only to sink back with a groan, the icy sweat streaking his heavily-sooted face as he tried vainly to loosen those torturing wire nooses which his ill-advised efforts had tightened about his already aching thumbs.

"Aw, Freckles! Don't make it worse. Here, lemme loosen them loops a mite. I don't aim to torture you unnecessary. Only, just don't strain on 'em no more. It's plumb useless. You see, them loops is held apart by a short stick wired onto the straight piece between your hands, so you just can't do nothing but set.

"Well," as he resumed his seat and began to roll a cigarette, "as I was saying, Freckles, I don't envy you.

You do look funny, even at night, but in the daylight," and his hearty laugh went echoing down the canyon, while Leaping Calf, who understood English fairly well, was translating for the grinning and appreciative Lame Wolf.

"My—my gosh, Hank! Hell! Dammit, man, you—you wouldn't take me in like this?" Freckles pleaded, almost tearfully, for the first time, apparently, fully awake to the awfulness of his predicament. And, no doubt, memories of the countless pranks he had played upon the fun-loving punchers in that section must have come trooping back. Only too well did both he and the wily Hank realize that, from then on, his existence would be unbearable in this section of the country if this ever got out and he was taken into town in his present ridiculous condition.

"Hank! Put me over the road for stealing the damned, blatting sheep, but—but, don't take me in this way!"

"I'm sorry, Freckles, but, don't you see, I just can't do different. I gotta take you, just as you are, to make my case stick. It's a shame, too, for you did put over a good one, and you had these Injuns scared just about green. Nope, Freckles, much as I hate to do it, I've got to take you in, as is. Of course, if you wasn't so dang hostile, and would listen to reason, now——" Hank paused and stared meditatively into the fire.

"What? For the love of gran'ma! Hell! I—I'll do anything you ask, if——"

"Uh huh. It does make a difference, don't it, Freckles? Of course, I know you're hot-headed an' full of fight, but you're up agin' it, boy. You sure are."

"Aw, Hank! You know dang well you'd 'a' felt the same way." Freckles pleaded miserably.

"Say, Freckles, how'd you like to be a Texas Ranger?" Hank asked, with seeming irrelevance. Freckles, he knew, like himself, was originally from Texas.

"That was always my ambition," Freckles replied, a trifle bitterly. "I was almost accepted once, and then I got drunk and pulled a fancy stunt, and I lost out."

"Uh huh. I know you're great on that sort of stuff, old hoss, and that's out in that bunch. Still, I take it that what you crave is excitement.

"Now, if you'll give me your word not to let me down, and to keep your feet on the ground, I think I can get you on."

"Hank! Honest?" There was something almost boyish in Freckles' eagerness, then his head sank dejectedly. "But you can't git on with a crim'nal record, Hank, and you got me dead to rights."

"Yes, so I have, Freckles, and it can be made plumb serious. No feller can keep pulling stunts like yours and keep from getting his foot in up to his neck, sooner or later. What do you know about Ma Johnson's kidnaping?"

"What? Ma Johnson kidnaped? Why, hell, Hank! Ol' Jim Fallansby, or Mike Shane, or Buck Raines, or even Frank Updike'd kill any one who done that! Why, dammit, when they hired me——" and he broke off abruptly.

Hank chuckled softly. "Go ahead, Freckles. You said too much—or not enough. You might just as well come clean."

"Dang it all, Hank, can't you forget what I said?" Freckles begged. "You—you see, it was agreed that this was to be done on my own responsibility, but talking about Ma Johnson got under my hide. Why,

she's been almost like a real mother to me, an' I'd sure go gunnin' for anybody as would hurt a hair on her head!"

"Curly Hughs done it, Freckles. I've known him before, and Ma's safe home. I won't deny I said that to make you talk. And now, just come clean and give me the low-down. Neither me nor Jeff hones to cause trouble, and Curly's gone and ain't coming back. There's a cauliflower-eared skunk in town I aim to get. Otherwise, there's no reason to press this thing—if you give me your word you're through."

Freckles sat staring into the fire. At last, he sighed heavily, then told Hank the bargain.

"I'd guessed it about that way, Freckles. Now tell me, is there much of that red ochre, you painted the sheep with?"

"Gosh, yes! The whole dang mountain seems to be made of it. Why, them Injuns has dug back in that hole a good forty foot, to where it's soft!"

"Yeah? Well, listen, now, Freckles. I happen to be a personal friend of the Governor of Texas, an' I know Cap'n Bradley of the Rangers right well. Now, if I give you a letter to each, and promise to do my darnedest to get you on, will you lay off your fool pranks for a year and promise to come down to earth and listen to reason, if I forget all this, release you, and let you wash up?"

"Hank, I'll give you my hand and word on it. Nobody can say I ain't a man of my word."

"You're on, feller," Hank accepted, getting up and releasing Freckles' swollen thumbs.

"SAY, Jim have you heard anything from Freckles?" demanded Buck Raines, almost a month later.

"No, an' neither has Frank Updike. He seems to have plumb disappeared. An' Jeff sold off every dang sheep on his range, an' is stockin' up with pure-bred Herefords. Dang it! Every time the ol' buzzard sees me, he gives me the horse laugh. He's carrying around a roll of bills as would choke a cow, an' payin' cash for everything! He's paid off all his debts, an' when I went in to pay the interest on my mortgage and see about renewing my notes at the bank, they told me I'd have to see Jeff. The darned old pelican had bought it!

"Hello, Mike!" Jim Fallansby interrupted himself to shout to the approaching horseman. "Light an' rest your spine!"

"How are ya!" boomed Mike as his twinkling eyes rested upon the two ranchers. "Be gorry, I'm thinking it's no information I'm gettin' here! Where the devil's Jeff gitting all his kale? The danged fool has bought up the mortgage on my ranch, and the bank says it's him I must be seein' to get it renewed! Can you tie that?" he demanded as he sat down.

For a time, the three sat in silence. "Have you heard anything from Freckles, Mike?" Jim asked, at last.

"Never a word. And Curly Hughs mailed in his resignation from Salt Lake City, last week. There was one damn skunk, if you ask me! He was tryin' to organize a bunch of the small ranchers to wipe out Jeff. Blast his hide! I kicked the dirty bum offn my place."

"Uh huh. He come to see me," Buck Raines commented. "I told him I'd shoot him on sight, if he started any burning or killing around here."

"Same here, almost," snorted Jim. "Lefty Stevens said they was a big feller came in and beat hell outa Curly, one day about a month ago.

Then he gun-whipped Butch Kelly, who tried to keep him from takin' Curly away. And, come to think about it, I ain't seen Butch the last three weeks. I never did cotton to him, an' couldn't see why Curly wanted him fer a deputy. Dang it all, this thing's getting my goat. Say! Let's go see Jeff. Darned if I ain't gonna eat crow an' ask the old buzzard what's happened. They's sure somethin' come off as we don't know about."

Jim's suggestion caused an abrupt and painful silence. Mike and Buck looked at each other sheepishly.

Suddenly Mike laughed. "The laugh's on us, boys! C'mon. Let's go on over and let the blasted old hoss thief give us the ha ha! He's got it coming—an' so have we," he added, a bit ruefully.

JEFF JOHNSON'S faded old eyes brightened and a knowing twinkle came into them as he sat eyeing his three old friends. He was thoroughly enjoying their discomfiture.

While Jim Fallansby had been the first to suggest this visit, it seemed that only the blunt old Mike Shane had the nerve to broach the subject nearest to their hearts.

"Jeff," Mike began, his face a dull red, "we're licked, and we know it. What we hone to know——"

"Just a minute, fellers," Jeff interrupted him. "I got some prime likker, so let's oil our tonsils first," and he disappeared into the house, to return, almost at once, with a jug and four ordinary water glasses, which he proceeded to fill with a lavish hand. "Here's mud in your eyes, boys. Drink hearty!" he finished, downing his glassful in one prodigious gulp, the others following suit.

Mike's face contorted into a hideous grimace, and a shudder shook his big body. His eyes bulged. He appeared as one about to strangle, or on the verge of apoplexy. "That's good likker!" he exclaimed hoarsely, at last, as he succeeded in catching his breath.

"Yeah," Jeff answered, rather whimsically. "It's been aging for some time. I ain't had much comp'ny, recent," he added softly.

"Jeff, we're a bunch of mules," Mike spoke up, then getting to his feet, extended his gnarled hand; "but we're plumb throwed, hog tied an' branded. We're licked to a frazzle. Will ye shake the hand of a repentant man?"

Mellowed, perhaps, by the potent liquor, the four old cronies shook hands solemnly, loosened their shirt collars, and again sat down.

"An' now, Jeff, spill the dirt, you old hoss thief!" Mike demanded.

"Well, boys, Freckles earned his fifteen hundred dollars. He had me plumb licked, and until you agree to see that it's paid, I'll never tell," Jeff delivered his ultimatum.

Promptly, the scarlet-faced three pledged their agreed sums.

"All right. Well, you know what Freckles done—red sheep, walking skeletons, and all, but I doubt you know how he done it.

"First off, he went to that old red bluff where the Injuns gits their war paint. He mixed hisself up a mess of the stuff an' starts dippin' sheep, a few at a time. He 'lowed his only fear was that a rain might come along and wash it off—and when it did, danged if it didn't help him more'n it hurt!

"I got Hank Ellison, an' he got busy. The first thing he did was to run Curly Hughs outa gas. Curly was trying to start a war, then grab off some good ranches like was done in the Lincoln County war. I know you fellers wasn't in on that. Hank

told me the agreement, just before he caught and salivated that Butch Kelly for kidnaping Ma. Him an' Curly laid it on to you fellers."

"Hell, no!" boomed all three in chorus. "My heavens, Jeff, you don't think we had——"

"No," Jeff interrupted; "I know better'n that. Well, Hank scotched that, first thing, and permanent.

"Next he caught Freckles, who'd been painting the outlines of the bones on red sheep with phosphorus, so's they looked like skeletons in the dark. Boy! They sure did! Red sheep looks plumb black in the dark, so only them painted bones showed. Uh huh, but he was just gettin' all set to pull a fast one when Hank nabbed him. He'd figgered out that by paintin' only one side of them blasted woolies with phosphorus, he could turn 'em around sudden, an' it would look like they'd disappeared into thin air!

"You know the rest. I'm lettin' them Navajos go ahead with the sheep on their reservation, but I aim to go in for thoroughbred Herefords here.

"Freckles has got a job with the Texas Rangers. Hank did that, too," and Jeff smiled contentedly.

"But how come you to git all this dinero?" demanded Jim. "You needn't try runnin' no whizzer onto us by claimin' you made it outa them stinkin' blattin,' range-runnin' woolies, neither!"

JEFF chuckled as his dancing eyes dwelt upon each of his perspiring friends in turn. "Uh huh. I come dang nigh forgettin' to thank you fellers for that. It was sure white of you, and I don't blame you for calling me for failing to mention my gratitude."

"Us? Huh! You ain't drunk, are you?" Jim snorted.

"Nope. Not ever. You see, it's like this; you fellers paid Freckles, or will, since you hired him, so, of course, I naturally figgers I owe you a vote of thanks."

"What's that got to do with it?" snorted Buck Raines. "It's just about as clear as mud!"

"Have I gotta draw you button heads a diagram? Well, like I said, Freckles was usin' that red dirt for colorin' them sheep. Well, Hank took a good look at it. Boys, she's the biggest an' best cinnabar deposit in Arizony, and I sold a half interest in it for half a million dollars, cash money. There's one awful demand for quicksilver, these days.

"C'mon. Let's have another snort," and Jeff reached for the jug.

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